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Costa Rica arrests top Contra leader

By James Morrison
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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica — Costa Rican authorities have arrested a top Nicaraguan rebel leader they say entered the country illegally, and the government ordered the disruption of the supply lines of insurgents fighting Nicaragua's Sandinista government.

In a televised address last night, Costa Rican President Luis Alberto Monge apologized to Nicaragua for recent attacks on its embassy here over a May 31 border clash, and condemned protesters who blew up an electrical tower this week to protest Costa Rican power sales to Nicaragua.

"Our defense and our security reside in our rights, not in the force of any kind of army," said Mr. Monge — leader of a small Central American country that abolished its military in 1948 and shares a 200-mile border with Marxist-led Nicaragua, the most heavily-armed country in the region.

"I am calling on Costa Ricans not to be violent, not to seek war, and to avoid militaristic temptations," President Monge said. "Force is the reasoning of the beast. The right is the reasoning of the man." He called on his countrymen to remain calm.

Yesterday, authorities arranged a press conference at the Civil Guard headquarters for Tito Chamorro, second in command of the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (ARDE), who was arrested Wednesday about 40 miles from the border, reportedly en route with 3,000 pounds of food to rebel camps in Nicaragua.

He told reporters he had come to see an eye doctor, not to make war.

Mr. Chamorro was expelled from Costa Rica in March after he held a news conference here asking sup-

port for the anti-Sandinista rebels. The government said he had violated Costa Rica's policy of neutrality.

Officials said the vehicle in which Mr. Chamorro was traveling contained thousands of bullets, which were confiscated. Mr. Chamorro said at the news conference the bullets had been captured from Sandinista troops and put in the vehicle by mistake.

It was not clear whether Mr. Chamorro would be charged or how long he would be held.

This week, Costa Rican police also dismantled a rebel radio transmitter, confiscated food, and intercepted 40,000 rounds of ammunition, an informed source said.

The ammunition for AK-47 and M-16 rifles, confiscated on Sunday, was destined for three ARDE bases inside Nicaragua that fell to the Sandinistas on Monday.

The resistance fighters are critically short of weapons, ammunition, food and medical supplies, ARDE spokesman Carol Predo told The Washington Times yesterday.

They retreated from their camps in Nicaragua, which included ARDE's main jungle airstrip, because they could not match the firepower of Nicaragua's air force, rockets and mortars, he said. Some of the rebels had fewer than 30 rounds of ammunition, he said.

Mr. Predo would not discuss who is responsible for disrupting the rebel supply lines that run from inside Costa Rica north to a border area in southern Nicaragua. A presidential spokesman yesterday confirmed that Costa Rican police disrupt the supply lines because they threaten Costa Rica's neutrality in the intense Central American conflict inside Nicaragua.

However, the spokesman, Armando Vargas said he did not know whether the police had confiscated any supplies recently, and refused to characterize any new police action as a crackdown.

"This is nothing new," he said. "It has been the policy of President Monge since he took office three years ago."

A knowledgeable diplomatic source, who asked not to be identified, said Costa Rican police are "stepping up" their control over ARDE rebels here because of growing tension between Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

"It's my strong impression that Costa Rica is cracking down," the source said. "Costa Rica treads a very fine line. They don't want to be seen to be giving the Nicaraguans an excuse to invade."

Costa Rica has accused Nicaragua of attacking one of its police patrols on the border May 31, killing two and wounding eight members of Costa Rica's Civil Guard. Nicaragua has denied involvement and blamed fleeing rebels for the clash.

The attack sparked street demonstrations in this capital city and two assaults on the Nicaraguan embassy. Costa Rica has also recalled its ambassador to Nicaragua and refuses to return him until the "situation" is resolved, Mr. Vargas said.

Asked why Costa Rica allows ARDE officials to operate in San Jose but disrupts their supply lines, Mr. Vargas said, "This country's constitution guarantees political refuge but prohibits military action against another country."

"They can organize. They can demonstrate. They can publish their magazines here. But they cannot jeopardize the neutrality of Costa Rica," he said.

"In other words," he added, "they can shout, but they cannot shoot."

Mr. Vargas said 1,000 policemen sent to the border after the border clash cannot effectively control all supply line along the rugged boundary.

ARDE is one of the smallest resistance groups fighting the Sandinistas. It claims 3,000 to 4,000 active fighters and another 7,000 who would fight if they had supplies.

The group has received no assistance from the United States in more than a year and is relying on private deliveries of arms and other supplies from American businessman in Mexico, Cuban exiles in Miami and from unidentified sources in Venezuela, several sources said yesterday.

ARDE's military operation is led by the charismatic Eden Pastora, who as the legendary Commander Zero was once a military leader of the Sandinistas in their revolution against Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza.